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SUBJECT: RUSSIA: LIBERAL PARTIES STRUGGLE TO STAY IN GAME

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns: Reasons: 1.4 (b, d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Political observers believe that the prospect of a liberal political party winning representation in the State Duma is slim, but statistically possible. However, local efforts by ruling party officials to remove the liberal-minded Union of Rightist Forces and Yabloko from some ballots in the March regional elections have raised concerns over the ability of these parties to compete. Party leaders and other election watchers peg the removal of SPS from four regional elections to a combination of machinations by regional United Russia leaders and incompetence --or machinations of its own-- by the SPS leadership. Observers express more concern over the exclusion of Yabloko from St. Petersburg, where the party is an opposition powerhouse. While Yabloko has appealed its exclusion to the Supreme Court, its party chief dismissed the prospect of fair elections, told us he remained open to cooperation with Putin's successor, vilified the Other Russia opposition, and urged the U.S. to "leave Russia alone." The Ambassador will continue to underscore U.S. concern over the use of technicalities to exclude parties from the March elections with senior GOR officials, including in upcoming meetings with the Election Commissioner and President's Chairwoman for Human Rights. End summary.

Statistical Window of Opportunity

¶2. (C) The United Russia-contracted Center for Political Technologies (CPT) maintains that statistically there is still an opportunity for a liberal "democratic" party to cross the seven percent threshold into the Duma in December 2007, but concedes the likelihood is slim. CPT Deputy Boris Makarenko said that recent polling data reveal that the parameters of the Duma election remain largely the same as three months ago: United Russia can expect to win about 40-50 percent, with the Communists securing 7-10 percent, Zhirinovskiy pulling in around seven percent (while capitalizing on his high popularity amid young voters, who enjoy his entertainment value), and the new political combination "Just Russia" attracting anywhere from 7-25 percent. Both Makarenko and ruling party spinmeister Gleb Pavlovskiy told us that there is still room for a "democratic" party to draw away some of those liberal ruling party voters (who constitute up to a third of United Russia's supporters in Moscow), who are dissatisfied with the government's performance. In a slick briefing provided to the Kremlin on voting scenarios, Pavlovskiy labeled the "catastrophic" electoral outcome as one in which five parties broke into the Duma, including a rightist party, leaving

United Russia with only 30 percent of the vote.

¶3. (C) Makarenko spelled out scenarios that would increase the chance of a "liberal" win in the Duma: the unification of SPS and Yabloko, despite bitter personality divisions at the top; a decision by Yabloko to withdraw entirely from the race; or a strong showing by SPS in the March regional elections, which would add to the momentum of its surprisingly strong second place showing in Perm in December 2006. SPS Chairman Nikita Belykh and SPS leader Boris Nemtsov separately told us that they will make a final run at unification with Yabloko Chairman Grigoriy Yavlinskiy following the March elections, but were pessimistic he would compromise. However, SPS eminence Anatoliy Chubais ruled out any merger, telling the Ambassador that "my best friend" Yavlinskiy "would not take yes for an answer" and had rejected unification despite SPS ceding to all of the Yabloko leader's terms. SPS leaders were circumspect in predicting success in the December Duma elections, with Nemtsov predicting that SPS would fail in its bid unassisted, or would just reach the seven percent threshold if nudged forward by the Kremlin. Political opposites, such as Pavlovskiy and Ekho Moskvii Editor Venediktov, agree that the Kremlin -- meaning Putin -- has no objection to a liberal party reaching the Duma.

Being Closed by United Russia Interference?

¶4. (C) SPS Chairman Belykh told us that his relations with the Kremlin were "neutral" and downplayed speculation of a Presidential Administration hand in manipulating the registration of parties at the regional level. However, at a

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February 6 press conference, he explicitly traced SPS's inability to get on the ballot for March 11 elections in the Republic of Dagestan and the regions of Vologda, Pskov, Samara, and Tyumen to the machinations of local authorities in areas where the Kremlin-sponsored party United Russia (YR) reigns. In his remarks, Belykh asserted:

-- that in Pskov region the regional electoral commission found that two SPS candidates were allegedly members of another party (dual membership is forbidden by law), other candidates had submitted "incorrectly-completed" forms and, allegedly, that several SPS candidates had withdrawn under duress;

-- that the Samara regional election commission (REC) had disqualified the party for "errors in documentation," without specifying the errors (Note: The CEC subsequently overruled the REC and reinstated SPS in Samara.);

-- that Vologda region authorities had pressured SPS candidates into withdrawing;

-- that Dagestan SPS representative Magomed Omarmagomedov has yet to be found since he disappeared in early January;

-- that money submitted by SPS in lieu of signature lists had not been deposited in time to qualify the party for participation.

¶5. (SBU) SPS has reportedly appealed to the relevant regional courts in all four of the five regions and Belykh has sent a letter urging Putin to initiate an amendment that would prohibit the removal of registered parties from regional ballots. (Belykh allowed that SPS employees may have sent the deposit to the wrong bank account in Tyumen. The party is investigating, he said.)

¶6. (C) In addition to interference by local YR officials, Belykh traced SPS's difficulties in the five regions to the efforts of YR Duma deputies Aleksandr Moskalets, Andrey

Vorobyev, and Boris Vinogradov who, he said, traveled to the regions in order to pressure local YR pols to remove SPS from the ballot. Belykh believed YR's heavy-handed behavior was prompted by a fear that competition from SPS and the recently-created "second" Kremlin party "Just Russia" could mean that YR would not poll as well as it had predicted. YR Chairman and Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov rejected Belykh's allegations. Pavlovskiy reacted cynically, telling us that Belykh was no newcomer to politics and engaged in many of the same tactics in areas where SPS had a stronger political structure. Golos Director Liliya Shebanova noted even-handedly that SPS was very weak in the regions where it had been disqualified (in contrast to Yabloko's being stripped from the ballot in its stronghold of St. Petersburg), with 2003 Duma returns in the five regions below the party's countrywide average of four percent. (In 2003, for example, SPS received only 2.1 percent of the vote in Tyumen, where the deposit was not paid on time this time around.)

SPS Games; Yabloko's Grievance

¶7. (SBU) In a February 7 conversation, SPS regional election campaign manager, Duma Deputy Anton Bakov, conceded that SPS claims were exaggerated, noting that the party had not even transferred the deposit necessary to qualify the party for the Tyumen elections. "We didn't have enough money to pay a deposit everywhere," Bakov said. Belykh's press conference comments about Tyumen were designed to put YR on the defensive and spare his cash-short party the expense of a campaign in a region where its chances were slight. SPS's efforts in Dagestan had become entangled in clan politics, Bakov said. Belykh agreed, telling us: "we picked the wrong clan leader." Bakov was philosophical about Omarmagomedov's disappearance, noting that "hundreds of people disappear every year in Dagestan."

¶7. (C) Bakov insisted, however, that the intimidation by YR Duma deputies of their regional confederates described by Belykh was true. SPS could not prove that Deputies Moskalets, Vorobyev, and Vinogradov had traveled to Pskov and Vologda but, "in provincial Russian towns everyone sees everything," and the deputies' presence could not be kept secret.

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¶8. (C) Bakov dismissed the appeals process. If SPS gets reinstated, he said, it will be because of "Anatoliy Borisovich's (Chubais)" ability to cut a deal with the

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Kremlin.

¶9. (C) Ekho Moskvy journalist Yevgeniya Albats described Central Election Commissioner (CEC) Aleksandr Veshnyakov, whom she interviewed February 6, as sanguine about SPS's problems but very disturbed about the liberal-democratic party Yabloko's registration problems in St. Petersburg. Foreshadowing Veshnyakov's February 8 decision to uphold the exclusion of Yabloko, Albats noted that the Commissioner had been "fighting for his survival" (Veshnyakov's term expires in March and he is seeking re-appointment), and pressure may be brought to bear on him. In a recent meeting with the Ambassador, Federation Council International Relations Committee Chairman Margelov, who hails from Pskov where Yabloko was removed from the ballot, attributed the move to the Governor's unhappiness over not being placed at the head of the United Russia party list. The result, Margelov maintained, was the Governor's decision to be hard on all parties. Golos Director Shebanova and CPT Makarenko agreed that the problems confronting Yabloko and SPS originated at the regional level, and were not directed by the Kremlin. However, they stressed that the failure of the Presidential

Administration to not signal forcefully that the tactical exclusion of the rightist parties was unacceptable made it culpable for the violations that occurred.

Yabloko: Next Steps

¶10. (C) With its appeal for reinstatement in St. Petersburg rejected by the CEC, Yabloko is filing a appeal to the Supreme Court. According to Moscow Yabloko Press Spokeswoman Yevgeniya Delendorf, the court filing would be made on February 13. Delendorf did not know when the Court would rule, but she expected that Yabloko's final petition on the St. Petersburg case would not be approved by the justices. If so, Yabloko would feature on the ballots in Komi, Krasnoyarsk, Murmansk, and Tomsk regions.

Yavlinskiy Defiant, but Open to GOR Partner

¶11. (C) In a recent meeting, Yavlinskiy dismissed the upcoming election cycle as a cynical exercise, described his participation as a humanitarian gesture to his party staff and their families, and said that "like an old circus horse" his party would perform in the elections -- if only to retain the habits of democracy. Yavlinskiy lashed out at the Other Russia opposition, arguing that they were "100 percent responsible" for creating Putin's Russia, since their accommodation of Yeltsin's undemocratic policies fatally compromised the development of institutions in post-Soviet Russia. Venting at the collection of oppositionists under the Other Russia tent, Yavlinskiy called them "liars and thieves, who are romancing nationalists and fascists." Despite his denunciation of Putin, Yavlinskiy held out the possibility of ultimately compromising with his successor, if there were any indications that the next Russian president was prepared to return to a more democratic path. As for the appropriate U.S. role in encouraging democracy in Russia, Yavlinskiy responded that America should "leave Russia alone" and, alluding to Iraq and Abu Ghraib, "put its own house in order."

Comment

¶12. (C) The cumulative amendments to the electoral law make it easy for political parties to be excluded from participation on technicalities, and the developments of the last several weeks have underscored that regional leaders have sought recourse to the legislation to remove rivals from the ballot under dubious circumstances. The Ambassador has raised this issue repeatedly in meetings with the senior GOR leadership and will do so again in upcoming meetings with the Election Commissioner and the President's Chairwoman for Civil Society and Human Rights, underscoring our particular concern over the removal of Yabloko from the St. Petersburg March ballot.

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